DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 734 RC 020 523

AUTHOR Paciotto, Carla
TITLE The Tarahumara of Mexico.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 9p.; In: Stabilizing Indigenous Languages; see RC 020 517.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; *American Indian Education; *Bilingual Education Programs; Cultural Maintenance; Culture Conflict; *Educational Change; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Language Maintenance; Mexicans; Native Language Instruction; Program Descriptions
IDENTIFIERS *Language Shift; Mexico (Chihuahua); *Tarahumara (Tribe)

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews factors contributing to the loss of language and culture of the Tarahumara people of Mexico and describes a program aimed at preserving Tarahumara language and culture. The Tarahumara people reside in the Sierra Tarahumara in the northern state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Although the Tarahumara people successfully avoided acculturation for centuries, today their land base has been reduced to half of its original size and less than 20 percent of the people residing in the Sierra are Tarahumara. More than ever, the intensification of economic enterprises brought about by the migration of non-Indians threatens the survival of Tarahumara culture. A 1984 government report addressing the educational needs of the Tarahumara people documented the gradual decline of Tarahumara language and culture, particularly among school-age children. In order to prevent further decline of Native language and culture, a bilingual/bicultural program was developed for indigenous elementary school children in the Sierra Tarahumara. The goal of the program was to modify the national curriculum on the basis of the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the Tarahumara. Now in its fourth year, the program integrates relevant cultural material, employs the Tarahumara language, has standardized materials based on the Tarahumara language, and implements teacher training courses for indigenous and non-Tarahumara teachers. The program's success, however, depends upon a larger community effort to maintain and strengthen the role of the Tarahumara language in daily family and social life, as well as to develop sustainable economic and social self-sufficiency. (LP)

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The Tarahumara of Mexico

Carla Paciotto

> The destruction of languages is an abstraction which is concretely mirrored in the concomitant destruction of intimacy, family and community, via national and international involvements and intrusions, the destruction of local life by mass-market hype and fad, of the weak by the strong, of the unique and traditional by the uniformizing, purportedly "stylish" and purposely ephemeral.
>
> — Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 1991, p. 4.

Around the world today, the languages and cultures of numerous minority and indigenous populations are threatened with total assimilation by dominant cultures. The Tarahumara of Mexico are certainly no exception. As a result of accelerated and unequal rates of social change and growth in socio-economic and technological power, indigenous groups in Mexico have been further marginalized, forcing them to retreat to the farthest reaches for geographical isolation. The geographical buffer, however, has slowly dwindled, causing an increase in alienation and despair and the disintegration of indigenous communities.

At the same time, the last century has seen a number of persistent, traditional, and creative modes of language maintenance policies employed with success by indigenous communities on all continents. While the survival of a language is often connected to intergenerational continuity, the experience of such successful community actions has demonstrated that the survival of an indigenous community itself greatly depends on the function and value of its language. Viable models must now demonstrate the ability of small cultures and communities to thrive and evolve within their own experience.

Within the global village today, the challenge remains for indigenous communities to employ, modify and build upon the widely-acclaimed benefits and successes of language maintenance programs of other indigenous groups, seeking to not only slow the virtual demise of a culture, but foster viable ways for their contributions to greater world understanding and development. Reversing language shift, as Fishman has noted, remains as the critical option for the re-establishment of "local options, local control, local hope and local meaning to life" (1991, p. 35).

ED 395 734

RC 020523

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The Tarahumara

The Tarahumara, or *Raramuri*, as they call themselves, reside in the Sierra Tarahumara in the northern state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Linguistically belonging to the Uto- Aztecan family, they originally occupied more than 28,000 square miles of mountainous terrain, an area larger than the state of West Virginia.

Since the first European contact, their land has slowly been reduced and now is estimated to be half of the original size. According to the latest census of 1981 (Diagnostico, 1984), the total population of the Sierra Tarahumara is 311,114, of which fifty to sixty-five thousand are Tarahumara.

The Tarahumara are considered one of the few indigenous groups in North America that have been able to preserve their traditional style of life almost unmodified by three and a half centuries of contact with European and mestizo populations. According to De Velasco,

> Raramuri probably are the only numerically important tribe (between 50 to 60,000) that has succeeded in maintaining their culture practically uncontaminated, in spite of more than three centuries of contact with white people and their pressure . . . Raramuri have preserved their language, their original dresses, their handcrafts, and their traditional music. (1987, p. 29)

Contact Between Tarahumara and Mestizos

Since the beginning of the European contact in the seventeenth century, with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries, the Tarahumara people have witnessed and opposed the settlement in their land by European and mestizo populations. With the withdrawal of Jesuit missionaries in 1767, the encroachment of mestizos in Sierra Tarahumara was restricted mainly to mining companies and laborers. It was at the beginning of this century that the interest in the Tarahumara population and territory was awakened by the return of the Jesuits in the Sierra and by the renewed exploitation of its resources by mestizos.

Over the last century the penetration of the Hispanic population has doubled. Between 1920 and 1960 the Hispanic population rose from 100,000 to 190,000 (Merrill, 1983), greatly outnumbering the indigenous population. After the decline of the mining activity, mestizos remained as farmers or found jobs in the timber industry. The lumber interest, along with the recent expansion of road construction, the development of the tourism industry, and the exploitation of hidden and fertile lands for drug cultivation have largely accounted for the increase of non-Tarahumara inhabitants in the Sierras.

As a consequence of this steady and pressing intrusion of non-Indians in their original territory, Tarahumara have been obliged to leave their fertile and more accessible lands and retreat toward the more

mountainous area in the western part of the Sierras. In the process, the scarcity of cultivable lands has necessitated the modification of a significant part of their economy. The Tarahumara have borrowed some agricultural practices from mestizos by introducing cattle and sheep herding (De Velasco, 1987). More recently, with the expansion of labor and land policies, including the tenant-farming *ejido* system, the Tarahumara have been forced to participate in the larger Mexican economic and political structure. According to De Velasco, "to participate in the life of the *ejido*, the Tarahumara tend to subordinate to the calendar of white people, to their work time table, etc., and their freedom . . . tends to be subjected to the interest of white people and machine and paper producers" (1987, p. 31).

However, in spite of the enforced contact with the mestizo society and the embrace of part of the modern economic structure, the Tarahumara people have managed to remain economically self-sufficient and independent on a small scale (De Velasco, 1987) This economic autonomy from the mestizos has probably been one of the keys to the lack of assimilation of the Tarahumara to greater mestizo social values and practices.

The relative lack of contact with the Hispanic world has also been the result of the inaccessibility of part of Tarahumara land, the partial isolation of their communities, and the dispersed configuration of their settlements. Until recently, the Tarahumara have been successful in adapting the technology of the modern Mexican society to their needs without making devastating compromises in terms of wider cultural adaptation. However, the economic development and exploitation of the Sierras by non-Tarahumara is weakening the self-defense and preservation mechanisms of the Tarahumara communities. According to De Velasco, "the old mechanisms that did not achieve a complete liberation now are starting to be insufficient even to maintain the resistance" (1987, p. 24).

In the last decade, the Tarahumara have been increasingly threatened by enormous pressures to assimilate and to succumb to mainstream Mexican society from several directions. Timber companies are ruthlessly exploiting and depleting Tarahumara forests; the *narcotraficantes* have seized the most fertile and hidden plots of land, forcing unprotected and vulnerable Tarahumara to participate in the cultivation of drugs; new roads are being laid, allowing for easier penetration of the more isolated Sierra Tarahumara areas; and, national and international tourism, prompted and exploited by the Mexican populace, is dramatically rising and encroaching in previously isolated regions. More than ever, the intensification of such economic enterprises, especially in the timber, drug and tourist industries in the Sierra Tarahumara, threaten the survival of the Tarahumara culture and existence.

Many Tarahumara are now seeking low-paying job opportunities in the regional cities, due to the inadequacy of their reduced plots and pastures. The intense incursion is showing some elements of disintegration of the Tarahumara culture. Velasco (1987) notes the increasing debasement of the value of *las fiestas*, the rituals that he depicts as the main socially and culturally unifying force in Tarahumara society. Losing the greater religious or mystical and traditional tone, he terms an erosion or "folklorization" of the role and value of some of the most important ceremonies of Tarahumara. On a material level, the Tarahumara who live closer to mestizos settlements tend to leave behind the traditional dresses, adopting the cheaper and more fashionable clothes of the modern Mexican society.

Toward Language Loss

As a consequence of the increased contact with mestizos, the *Diagnostico de Necessidades y Propuesta Curricular* (1984), compiled by the governmental organization *Coordinacion Estatal de la Tarahumara*, documented a gradual decline of the Tarahumara language in Tarahumara communities as part of a larger study on Tarahumara educational needs. Though failing to report variables affecting language use, the assessment did suggest that the intense pressure toward contact with mestizos resulted in a trend toward lesser use of the native Tarahumara language.

The *Diagnostico* (1984) presented a diversified use and decline of the Tarahumara language in the Sierras. Overall, the report found that many communities presented a diglossic situation with varying levels of bilingualism among the speakers. This probably is the most frequent case encountered either in communities or in schools. In some instances, the report found that the native language was spoken only by the older generation in several Tarahumara communities, where fathers and mothers had interrupted the intergenerational transmission of Tarahumara language to their children. In other communities, the report recorded the opposite situation, where entire communities remained totally monolingual. The *Diagnostico* (1984) also concluded that when children succeeded in completing primary school, they were likely to terminate the use of Tarahumara and, eventually, lose their native language.

Bilingual/Bicultural Programs for Indigenous Populations

In order to prevent further decline of the native language and culture, the Chihuahua State educational department (*Secreteria de Educacion Publica*) together with the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* have been working, developing and implementing a bilingual/bicultural program aimed at the education of the indigenous children in the Sierra Tarahumara. The goal of the program is to modify the national

curriculum on the basis of the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the Tarahumara.

The program is the result of a wider federal educational policy that, since 1970s, has declared the official policy for indigenous populations to be Bilingual/Bicultural Education (BBE) (Modiano, 1988). Coronado states that the federal government has recognized "[indigenous] languages and cultures as legitimate and important constituents of the national cultural patrimony, and today recognizes the necessity of starting from the linguistic and cultural traits of each group as a fundamental basis of the educational process" (1992, p.59).

An official report, *Fundamentos para la Modernizacion de la Educacion Indigena*, compiled in 1990 and published by SEP (*Secretaria de Educacion Publica*), provides the general goals of the BBE. As Hidalgo paraphrases them, in the report:

> 1. It is proposed that by the end of six years children will be fluent in all four skills in two languages: they will be able to understand, speak, read and write in both Spanish and their mother tongue. By doing so the indigenous languages of Mexico will be rescued, preserved and developed.
> 2. It is also proposed that a writing system for the Indian languages should be promoted in order to link the languages with modernization.
> 3. Indian languages should be used as both a subject and a medium of instruction, because the old practices of alphabetization proved to be decontextualized. (1994, p.200)

However, during the 1970s and part of the 1980s the implemented programs were strongly criticized as an unsuccessful attempt at creating bilingual programs, mainly because of the impossibility of relating the BBE curriculum designed by the central government to all the indigenous groups of Mexico.

Since the 1980s the Mexican educational system has been slowly changing its structure, shifting from a highly centralized system to a middle stage called '*desconcentracion*', and then to greater decentralization as an attempt to provide state educational departments with more control over their local schools. This trend, according to administrators and educators in the area of indigenous education, is a hopeful and positive movement for genuine reform of the regional educational system.

The reformed Article 13 of the *Ley General de Educacion General* of 1993 declared that the local educational authorities must:

> 1. Provide the initial, basic — including indigenous — and special educational services, as well as the teacher training.
> 2. Provide the Secretaria with the regional contents that will be included in the study plans and programs for primary and secondary schools, and for the teacher training in primary and secondary education. (p.11)

The *Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernizacion de la Educacion Basica* of 1992, in Article 13 stated that, "it will be the responsibility of the State Government to propose to the Secretariat of Public Education the design of the regional contents and its adequate inclusion in the general curriculum" (1992, p. 26).

These reformed laws have allowed the individual states to carry out what Prawda (1984) refers to as the *microplaneacion regional educativa*, the possibility of establishing projects aimed first at the needs assessment of each local and indigenous group, and then at the subsequent creation and development of specific programs culturally relevant to the students and, at the same time, in line with the general educational directives of the federal government.

In light of this reform, the *Coordinacion Estatal de la Tarahumara* developed and set in motion a bilingual/bicultural program for indigenous populations of the Sierra Tarahumara, which is now in its fourth year of implementation. During these last years both the State and the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* have made efforts to overcome the difficulties linked to the implementation of the BBE in the Sierra Tarahumara. Relevant cultural contents have been included in the curriculum, and the Tarahumara language is employed throughout the pre-school year and the first three grades. Since Tarahumara language consists of five dialects, it has been necessary to create a standardized form of the native language. This has also allowed for the development of standardized materials in Tarahumara. A basic vocabulary containing the different varieties has been compiled. Teacher training courses have been provided for indigenous teachers and non-Tarahumara teachers working in the school systems in indigenous communities.

In order to reverse the low prestige of the use of the Tarahumara language in class, as well as the stigma attached to bilingual teachers (*Diagnostico*, 1984), indigenous bilingual teachers now receive a higher salary than the monolingual Spanish teachers. The State policy has also allowed for the creation of day schools with a minimum of eight students. This has facilitated the access to school for children living in remote and inaccessible areas, circumventing the use of boarding schools which often work as an uprooting agent of the indigenous students from their family and culture.

The enthusiasm of the administrators and teacher trainers about this new program is high and full of hope. Many indigenous parents now

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feel more comfortable with a more culturally relevant curriculum for their children and can relate to indigenous teachers more easily. However, the program is still in its initial phase and an evaluation of its outcomes would be premature. Many problems linked to its implementation have not been overcome yet. The number of bilingual teachers is still too limited to cover the actual need. The implementation of the program usually depends on the total absence of mestizo children in the class. The program has only been extended through the first four grades of primary school. Not all the indigenous children attend public schools, and therefore have a chance to employ their language in the educational process.

In general, it is uncertain to what extent the bilingual/bicultural program is being implemented by individual teachers. A study of teachers' attitudes and practices in the classroom would be necessary to define the impact of the program on the education of the Tarahumara student, and to what extent this program functions beyond previous efforts to accomplish an easier transition to the majority language.

Conclusion

Efforts toward the development and implementation of genuine bilingual/bicultural programs for the Tarahumara are undoubtedly essential for the maintenance of their language and culture, especially in context of the reality that the Tarahumara must now confront intense encroachment by the majority society. However, as Fishman states,

> the over-reliance on the school with respect to the attainment of Reversing Language Shift goals is merely an example of the more widespread tendency to seek out and depend upon one-factor solutions to a very involved, multivariate problem. . . . Mother tongue transmission requires mother tongue use for the purposes of intergenerational intimacy and mutual socialization. (1991, p. 366)

The challenge for the Tarahumara communities today is to maintain and strengthen the role of the Tarahumara language in daily family and social life, as well as developing sustainable ways of economic and social self-sufficiency and independence from the outside society. As De Velasco noted with the role of the fiestas, "the preservation of the Raramuri identity — as it is linked to the sharing of fundamental values . . . and the sharing traditions and expressions . . . depends essentially on the fiestas," (1987, p.316) the larger issue confronting the Tarahumara is the preservation of a viable framework for their social values and traditions into the 21st century.

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